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NON-MECHANICAL FABRICATION OF CARBON-CONTAINING
WORK PIECES

By

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NON-MECHANICAL FABRICATION OF CARBON- CONTAINING WORK PIECES

BACKGROUND

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The present invention relates to a method of forming complex features and fine details in work pieces made of Carbon-Carbon (C-C) composite material and other carbon-containing materials. The present invention also relates to heat exchangers and fuel cells formed of carbon-containing materials.

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Carbon-Carbon composite materials are used in certain heat exchangers and fuel cells. Consider a Carbon-Carbon plate-fin heat exchanger core including a stack of plates and fins. The plates may be made from flat thin-gauge two-dimensional Carbon-Carbon woven fabrics, and the fins may be made from thin-gauge two-dimensional Carbon-Carbon woven fabrics that are corrugated. Thickness of the plates and fins may range between about 0.1 millimeters and 1 millimeter.

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Fabricating the Carbon-Carbon fins can be both difficult and time consuming. The fins define long, narrow channels that function as fluid passageways. Because many fins have complex shapes, creating a high density of fins (i.e., x number of fins per linear inch) is even more difficult. Yet it is extremely desirable to increase the fin density in order to increase the heat transfer capability of the heat exchanger.

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Carbon-Carbon bipolar plates of proton exchange membrane fuel cells are typically flat, having a thickness of about 0.2-1 millimeters and, in addition, having intricately shaped, fine-featured flow fields for channeling the flow of the hydrogen and oxygen gases used in the operation of the fuel cells. These flow fields typically have defined features of sub-millimeter dimensions. Forming such fine detailed features is extremely difficult.

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SUMMARY

Complex shapes and fine details in a carbon-containing work piece are
5 formed using photolithographic etching methodology. A layer may be
formed in a specific pattern on one or both sides of the work piece.
Selective etching of the exposed portions of the work piece creates the
desired features in the work piece.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Figure 1 is an illustration of a method of fabricating a Carbon-
Carbon work piece in accordance with the present invention.

Figure 2 is an illustration of a work piece formed in accordance with
15 the method of Figure 1.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Photolithography is well known for manufacturing integrated circuits
20 and micro-electromechanical systems (MEMS) in semiconductors. The
underlying work piece may be formed of Si or GaAs as well as quartz.
With proper modification, the same method may be employed with
Carbon-Carbon composites and other carbon-containing materials to
create fine-dimensional structures with close tolerances without the need
25 for any mechanical machining. Using the present invention, it becomes
possible to mass-produce much more robust structures with finer
dimensions and less mechanical damage than would otherwise occur with
conventional machining techniques.

An advantage of photolithography as compared to conventional
30 machining is that photolithography is directly applicable to large batch
processing, assuring very reproducible dimensions in each work piece. As

a consequence, the manufacturing time and cost are significantly reduced while the yield of acceptable parts improves.

According to the present invention, a desired pattern may be etched into a layer deposited on the work piece. Additional etching of the exposed portions of the work piece serves to remove Carbon-Carbon composite material, forming the desired features in the underlying work piece.

Referring to Figure 1, a photolithographic method of creating fine details and complex features in a work piece made of Carbon-Carbon composite material is illustrated. The method may be employed in fabricating a finely dimensioned, complex-shaped fluid-flow pathway in a flat Carbon-Carbon (C-C) plate of the type required in a bipolar plate of a fuel cell. A layer is deposited on one or both sides of a C-C work piece (block 102). The layer may initially comprise a uniform coating of aluminum, silicon or other appropriate material deposited by physical evaporation, sputtering, chemical vapor deposition, electroplating, electroless plating and the like onto the C-C work piece. Prior to being loaded into a deposition chamber, the work piece is degreased and cleaned using liquid solvents, such as methylene chloride, acetone and isopropanol (block 104). The work piece may also be cleaned via the gas phase. With regard to the use of physical evaporation to form the mask layer, the work piece is then loaded into a deposition vacuum chamber (block 106) where it is placed on a holder (planetary) which can be rotated around one or more axes and which can accommodate multiple work pieces. One or several appropriate mask materials, such as aluminum, silicon, etc. may be employed for creating the mask layer by evaporation onto the work piece. The mask materials are loaded into hearths in the chamber (block 108). The vacuum chamber is pumped down and purged with an inert gas (block 110). This pump/purge cycle is repeated three times in order to remove residual air and water vapor impurities from the

chamber. The chamber is then pumped down with a high-vacuum pump to a pressure in the range 1×10^{-7} to 1×10^{-5} Torr (block 112). The work piece on the rotating planetary is then optionally heated using quartz halogen lamps, in order to further outgas the work piece and/or heat it to a desired temperature. The desired mask layer is then deposited by heating the hearth(s) containing the material(s) to be deposited using an electron gun to the temperature required for evaporating such material(s) at the desired rate(s) (block 114). Alternately, other heating methods may be used to heat the material(s) in order to cause evaporation. When the material(s) in the hearth(s) have reached the set temperature(s), appropriately placed shutters are opened (block 116) to commence the deposition of the mask layer on the work piece. When the desired thickness of the mask layer is reached, the shutters are closed. After the coated work piece has cooled, it is removed from the chamber.

A desired pattern may be formed in the mask layer on the work piece using photolithographic methodology known from semiconductor manufacturing. Briefly, a photoresist layer is deposited on the masked work piece (block 118) and a desired pattern is etched in the photoresist layer using known methods (block 120), such as by only exposing that portion of the photoresist corresponding to the desired pattern to ultra-violet light, achieved by placing a mask in the path of the ultra-violet light, and then dissolving the unexposed portion of the photoresist using appropriate chemicals. The exposed portion of the mask layer is then etched (block 122) using an appropriate chemical. For example HCl is used to etch aluminum or an $\text{HF}:\text{HNO}_3$ mixture is used to etch silicon, thereby exposing the desired pattern in the work piece.

Alternatively, the desired pattern in the mask layer may be formed by placing a shadow or contact mask over the work piece in the physical evaporation chamber before depositing the mask layer. The desired feature, such as the gas-flow pathway, is created in the work piece by

etching the exposed portions of the work piece to a predetermined depth (block 124). Etching the work piece may be accomplished in a number of ways. For example, plasma etching may be employed to remove material from the work piece. Alternatively, reactive ion etching using appropriate gases would provide a similar result. The masked work piece may be subjected to an oxidizing environment at an appropriate temperature, for example in the range of about 400-500°C. A lower oxidation temperature can be used in conjunction with a plasma or electrical discharge, wherein the mask layer would serve as a stable barrier against oxidation on the still coated portions of the work piece.

Once the work piece is etched to a predetermined depth, the remaining mask layer is dissolved or etched (block 126) using either liquid phase etchants, e.g. HCl for aluminum or gas phase etchants. Alternately, the mask layer may be removed by other methods, for example by melting. Aluminum melts at 660°C, at which temperature carbon is stable.

The present invention is not limited to the specific embodiment described above. The mask layer may be formed of a variety of materials other than aluminum or silicon. For example, a layer of silicon dioxide or tungsten may be substituted. The mask layer may also be formed using other methods, such as sputtering, chemical vapor deposition, electroplating, electroless plating, etc.

The photolithographic method may be used to fabricate the Carbon-Carbon work piece 200 as illustrated in Figure 2. Once the method 100 is completed, the work piece 200 includes a defined area 202 corresponding in size and shape to the location wherein the Carbon-Carbon material has been removed.

The present invention is not limited to Carbon-Carbon work pieces. Other carbon-based work pieces may be used, provided that the mask layer is chemically compatible with the carbon-based work piece.

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